



Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

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Interview with Mrs Leslie Strauss
Conducted by Nancy Saufer & Leith Greenslade
Volunteers for Selfhelp's 'Memoir Project'
Sundays, July 17, July 31 and October 9th
Flushing, Queens, NY, USA

I was born in September 15, 1924, in Frankfurt, Germany, and named Hilde Hermione Freudenreich. My mother, Irma, was born in Worms and my father, Milton, was born in Urspringen, a small town in Bavaria. My mother came from a very wealthy family and as a result was more educated than my father, who was a self-made man. My father had served in the German Army in World War II and met my mother when he was stationed in Worms. After their marriage, he established a textile business headquartered in Frankfurt that became very successful. So I grew up in a very wealthy household with my butler, a nanny, a Fräulein, a seamstress, and many other employees. My life was very much like the movie, "The Garden of the Finzi-Continis".¹

Before the rise of Hitler, our life in Frankfurt was very good. We moved several times but ended up in a large house with a beautiful garden near the Frankfurt zoo and botanical gardens. We weren't religious at all, but we were very supportive of the large Jewish population of Frankfurt and my father supported all of the synagogues and several social institutions including an orphanage. On Jewish holidays our chauffeur would drive us to all of the synagogues and we would make an appearance. He would drop us off about five blocks away from each synagogue and we would all visit in our finest clothes and I felt very special on those days. We also had big dinner parties on Jewish holidays at our house. For Pesach we would go to the best hotel in Frankfurt where they had a Jewish Passover with a Rabbi for all the Jews who didn't want to fuss at home. My elder brother was even bar mitzvahed at our house and we had a big party for him.

I really didn't know my parents because the kind of lifestyle we lived kept my brother and I apart from them. We lived in a separate wing of the house with a nanny and my brother had a Kinder Fräulein. My mother had a lifestyle that even here in America doesn't exist anymore. She didn't work and she had something called Die Stunde, 'the hour', when three or four of her friends would come to the music room in our house and a leading professor would come by to discuss whatever was deemed important to know at the time! The only time I really communicated with my mother was in the mornings when my nanny would bring me into the bedroom where my mother was waking up. I was a very lively kid and I would jump on the bed and have a wonderful time while the maid and the butler would come in and decide what the menu of the day would be and my mother would get on the telephone and call the baker, the florist, the butcher etc and order what was supposed to be for dinner. And that was my only connection to my mother. After that the nanny took me away and so I really didn't know my parents. I knew my father a bit better because he was a very un-Germanlike father. He actually played with me.

I attended a public nursery school when I was about 5 years old. I remember all of the children being asked to 'Heil Hitler' – it must have been about 1934 – and I refused to do it. After that I was sent to a school, "Philanthropien", which is still there today. It was a Jewish Day School for boys and girls and I loved it. It's not Jewish anymore of course, but it was then. My brother Walter was at a boy's school – a private and very prestigious boy's school – for Jews and non-Jews.

I didn't realize how limited it was to be a Jew until the last three years we were in Frankfurt (1935-1938). I remember seeing signs in shops, 'Juden Verboten'/Jews Forbidden and I was shocked that

¹ *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (Italian: *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*) is a 1970 Italian film, directed by Vittorio de Sica. It stars Lino Capolicchio, Dominique Sanda and Helmut Berger. The film is based upon Giorgio Bassani's novel of the same name and tells the story of a wealthy Jewish family and the rise of Fascism.

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some of the businesses that carried these signs were people my parents had done business with. I was about nine years old at the time but I remember certain coffee shops and cookie places had the signs up. My father had a very large business in Frankfurt. He imported wool from England and silk from France and Italy and sold it from a very large building in Frankfurt about the size of the New York City Department Store, Bergdorf Goodman. It was right near the main train station in Frankfurt, the business was called, "Textile", and the building is still there on Zeil Street, in the heart of Frankfurt. But my father's business suffered during the war. He had a chauffeur who turned out to be an arch-Nazi who threatened my father all of the time and bribed him. He had another employee who actually wore his Nazi uniform to work. This guy was stealing all of this stuff from my father's business and there was no way my parents could do anything about it. We were very aware of anti-Semitism.

But things really changed when my brother had to be sent away to England to school. At the time he went to a private school in Frankfurt and one day during sports practice another student took a metal ball and threw it against my brother's head. He had a serious concussion and was in hospital for about a week and when he came out my parents sent him immediately to England supposedly to a boarding school in Manchester. It turned out he didn't really spend much time at the school but saved a lot of the money my parents sent to him. He was given a lot of responsibility at a very young age when he was sent to England alone but he couldn't stay in Frankfurt. I missed my brother.

In 1936 my parents were so concerned about staying in Germany that my mother went to several countries to find a suitable place for us to emigrate. She looked at France and Israel, the UK and the US. My mother wanted France but my father said it was too close to Hitler and the French were very anti-Semitic. You know the story. She didn't like Israel and my brother was having a hard time in England so America was the final choice. My mother had taken a train from New York to California and wanted to buy all of this land but my father told her we couldn't afford it. Still they decided that America was the best place for us.

And then when I was about ten I was also sent away to school – to a finishing school in Switzerland – for safety reasons. The school was a finishing school for girls overlooking Lake Köln near Montreux. It was called Höhere Mädchenschule and I loved it. There was no anti-Semitism there and everything was beautiful. Mostly my parents visited me at the school but occasionally I went back to Frankfurt. I can remember when I was home one time and I was in the street playing on my stilts, the son of our neighbor who was an arch-Nazi attacked me with a knife, cutting my finger and singing the popular song, "When Jewish blood sprays ..." His name was Fritz and he was in the Hitler Youth. Well I was a very daring kid so I took one of my stilts and smashed his head and then I ran into my house. My parents put me on the next train back to Switzerland!

It was when my parents came to visit me in Switzerland once in 1938 that something terrible happened. They called home in Frankfurt and were told about the new rule that Hitler made that Jewish people could not employ non-Jews. Well, we had a lot of non-Jews working for us in our house and they loved their jobs. So I remember we had to let them all go and they were crying. I was a very sassy kid and I remember being angry that we had to lose all of these lovely people who worked in our household. Our cook and our butler were a married couple and I recall they had a daughter and she became a Nazi and she reported her parents for working for us and they were taken away.

After we lost all of our staff, we had to employ young Jewish women many of whom had come from villages to Frankfurt because it was safer in the city. And it was one of those women who was guarding our house during one of my parents' visits to Switzerland who called my parents and told them not to come back to Frankfurt because right at that moment they were picking up all of the Jewish men and taking them away.

So my parents took me out of school immediately and from that moment we were fleeing. I could have stayed at the school in Switzerland but my parents would have been sent back to Germany by the Swiss and so we all fled together. My parents did have reservations on every steamship that was

leaving from France for America and this was all paid for in Frankfurt but we did not have what was called a 'quota number'. At that time the Americans issued numbers and you could only get on a ship for America if you had an official number. My parents had a lot of money, but we couldn't leave Europe because we had no quota number.

While we were waiting for the quota number we had to remain in hiding and on the run for nine months, travelling all over Europe. The strange thing is I thought it was all a terrific adventure. I thought, "what excitement!" My mother, who had lived an improbable life, completely rose to the occasion. Whenever anyone looked at us the wrong way we would immediately go to the nearest train station and take the next train to wherever it went. In this way we went from Switzerland to Portugal, France, Belgium, Italy, Spain and Holland, in a circle.

My parents really didn't know me or know how to take care of children. I remember one night in Paris we were staying in a hotel and my parents went out to see if they could collect some money and they left me alone in the hotel room. There was no bathroom so when I had to go to the toilet I took the chamber pot and I put it near the radiator and when I got up I banged my head so badly that it started bleeding. I wasn't scared, I was furious at my parents for leaving me alone and when they came back I scolded them.

Now my mother realized how dangerous it was and I remember the one thing I had to do was always wear a little coat that was custom-made for me in Frankfurt. My mother had opened the seams of this coat and sewn in gold coins and she said, "If ever you look back and we are being taken away don't follow us". (Now I'm going to cry). She said, "Rip open the coat and give the gold coins and run away and they are not going to run after you because they want the gold". It didn't happen but that always stuck in my mind. I have three children, adults now, and I gave them all of those gold coins and they are very sentimental about it.

It's true my parents were considered 'rich refugees' because they did have money. Before we left Germany, my parents had paid people to take money and deliver it all over Europe. You would give these people, called 'Shiebers', say \$500 to be delivered to this person in Basel, say, and they would deliver half and keep half. That was the arrangement and they were basically honest. They really did what they were supposed to do. And they never got caught. But the people who received the money often were not that honest. One of them was a relative of ours in Basel, Switzerland who absolutely refused to give it back. So when we were on the run in Europe my parents were basically collecting the money from where it had been deposited. My father had a lot of connections all over Europe from his business and many of them helped us.

It was particularly scary in Italy. When we crossed the border into Italy on the train, a group of Mussolini's "blackshirts" stopped us and took our passports away. Now in Europe at this time without a passport you were essentially dead, so we had to stay in Milan and just wait to get them back. They didn't apprehend us but we were very frightened and they were of course cohorts of Hitler so we were frightened for our lives.

While we were in Milan, waiting for our passports, my father was so determined that his daughter should have all of the cultural opportunities that he insisted on sending me to the opera, La Scala. My parents were identifiably not Italian and I was very blond so they put a little hat on me and because I was a little girl and Italians were very kind to little girls they hired an Italian student to take me to La Scala. I didn't know what I was doing there! Another time I was with my parents looking at the Leonardo da Vinci painting, The Last Supper. We were sitting looking and my mother hears a voice behind us and she recognized a cousin of hers called Tante Tilla. She was also on the run didn't have a dime to her name. So my parents gave her sufficient money and she made it America. She had a daughter here already and so they both survived the war. Tante Tilla was also very beautiful which always helps in whatever country you're in. So that's how we saved Tante Tilla. Without us she would have been finito.

Another scary thing in Italy. We always checked into the cheapest hotels and they didn't have restaurants so my parents would give me lira and I would pretend I was deaf and dumb and they put a little hat on my head because there weren't that many blond kids at that time and I would run to the trattoria and hold out my hand and pretend to be deaf and dumb. And they were very kind. They took the money and gave me the food and I would run back to the hotel. (crying) So I remember one night while I was running back to my parents I was saying over and over in my head, "They're dead, they're dead", because I thought somebody had told on them. But they weren't dead but I do remember being terrified in Milan. Anyway, somehow we finally got our passports back and moved on again. Not long after, our quota number came through and we boarded the S.S. Washington at Le Havre in 1939. It was one of the last boats to leave Europe for America. If our number had come just two weeks later we would have all been dead, because no more ships left Europe carrying Jews to safety.

I can never remember my mother being scared or distressed. I was surprised by her strength. She came from a very wealthy family and was even taken to school in her own horse drawn carriage. She suffered during the war. Most of her family was killed including her twin sister. I remember about a month before we left Germany we went to Worms where my mother's sister still lived and my mother said to her sister, "Emma you have to come, you can't stay here". So my aunt's husband came out and announced they were not leaving because he was in World War I and would leave Germany in the last car, in the last seat, by the last window. Of course both were killed. When we went back to Germany as guests of the country many, many years later and I went to Worms and visited the synagogue, one of the oldest in Germany, I saw my aunt's name in a plaque on the ceiling and got hysterical. I got up in front of the group and told them that the German people had killed my aunt and uncle and two children.

My brother was very fortunate. He was four years older than me and remember he spent the war in England at a school. In fact one of the 'Shiebers' would deliver money to him from my parents regularly. He would meet at the border and get the money but he didn't permit himself to spend anything. He bought a bicycle but he never had gloves and England is very cold. But he was able to get a quota number and come to America when he was 17. He came with a friend from England and he was quite heroic. It was my brother who rented us our first apartment in America - on 76th Street a block from Central Park. The people had gone away for six months and the realtor rented it to my brother - a 17 year old boy!

One of the miraculous things was that our Jewish maid in Frankfurt who was still taking care of our house had managed to pack a very large container with many of our prized items of furniture and valuables. It was at Le Havre waiting for us when we boarded the S.S. Washington. That's why I still have all of this stuff in my house now. I gave a lot away to my kids but a lot is still here. When we got to New York we were able to arrange to have the container shipped. When we first arrived we were in a boarding house on 78th Street, west side. My mother was amazing. She bought a little electric heater, plates, and cheap cutlery from Woolworths and she made a huge pot of soup and we became known as the place where any refugee could come and he would get fed. I don't know where she got all of this courage, kindness and ability, but she did.

When I arrived in New York I didn't speak a word of English. I was 13 and had been living in such a catatonic state that when I was finally in America I felt I could drop all of my anxieties. The first day my mother took me to the local school - PS86 - on Amsterdam Avenue. My mother didn't know about the customs here and she sent me to school in my Swiss girl uniform. Did you read the book, "Madeleine"? That was the kind of look - with a hat and everything! Well, the principal put me in a grade like pre-K because he didn't think I could speak English and I couldn't, but I made up my mind within half a year that I was going to be done with this school. Compared to what I had in Switzerland it was terrible.

So my brother spoke the Kings' English because he had been in England and I didn't speak anything and we found a lot of magazines called, The New Yorker, in the Boarding House after we first arrived

and we would sit down every night and read them together and that's how we learned American English.

After the war my father went back to Germany – he was one of the first to do that – to see if any members of his large family were alive. There was nobody left. He went back to our house in Frankfurt and found out that our neighbors – Fritz's parents the boy who had cut me – had taken ownership of our house, with the agreement of the German government. My father met this neighbor who had stolen our house and asked him, "What ever happened to Fritz?" And the neighbor said that he never came back from the Russian front. And my father, who was a very kind man, said, "Well that's the best news I've had since I came back to Germany". And then he walked away. That for him, such a polite man, was an amazing thing to say. My father lost everything in the war – his family and his business.

My father never reestablished his business to the same level in America. He went into a smaller textile business and my mother worked for the first time. She sold antiques, a lot of them she had collected in Europe and brought with her when she came to America.

